



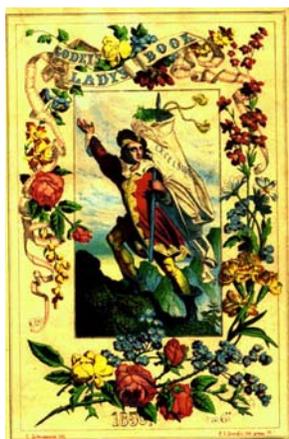
Fashion Sense – Or Sensible Fashion? *Clothing in the 19th Century*



A Study in Contradictions

Fashion of the 19th century is a study in contradictions and transformation. Fashion historians have come to call the change of men's fashions from the 18th to the 19th century “the great masculine renunciation.” The lines of the clothing became simple and stark, and the ease of wearing these suits made it an example of “modern” fashion, compared with the backwardness of women's clothing, still mired in the constrictions of ruffles, corsets, bustles, and lace.

Women's Fashions



Women's reform of the mid-19th century raised many controversial issues, and one of the most contentious was fashion. To be a lady of fashion was socially enviable, but nonetheless wholly reviled by the morals of prevailing culture. Fashion, therefore, represented a serious temptation toward impropriety. Still, women remained fascinated with fashion trends, and tried to find an appropriate compromise between the evil of becoming consumed by prevailing fashions and the grace of dressing in a style reflecting position and wealth.

Fashion articulated class position; extravagance defied it. A lady had to know the difference, manifesting a restrained elegance that would simultaneously project internalized self-control and solid male protection. Within those limits, fashion

also provided her an outstanding opportunity for muted competition with other women.

Women's clothes at the beginning of the Civil War were generally based on English, French, and New York fashions. Fabrics were spun in the Northern cotton mills or imported from the English fabric makers. *Godey's Lady's Book* was as familiar to the Southern lady of fashion as to her Northern relatives, and many women dressed to conform with a cultural ideal.

Less concerned about overall slenderness, clothing was designed to help a woman look narrow at the waist and wide at the face, hips, and shoulders. This was often accomplished with foundation garments which added width to a lady's silhouette. Nearly all lines of the garment served to emphasize the narrowness of the waist, and consequently directed attention to the center front of the waist. Day dresses had long sleeves and high necks, while evening dresses were typically sleeveless with low-cut bodices.



An 18-inch Waist



The "Wasp" Waist

Expensive gowns were often made of fabrics with large prints, as the waste in matching such prints indicated affluence. Fabrics included poplins, wools, linens, taffetas, rich silks, velvets and satins. Colors were brilliant and sharp, such as purple, blues, hunter green, burgundy, and mustard. Although black or dark colors were generally worn by women over 40, almost every lady had a black dress. And during the war, black, lavender, and grey became the colors used for mourning.

Underclothing consisted of several articles, starting with the chemise – similar to a low neck, short sleeve, white cotton nightie, and falling just below the knees. It could be easily tucked into pantaloons, which came “in” around the mid-1860s. Before then, underpants had not yet been invented. Pantaloons were split from the front waistband to the back, and loose-fitting, making them fairly comfortable.

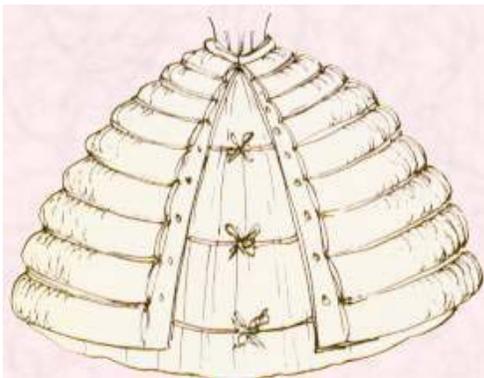


Considered fashionable to have a "wasp" waist, corsets became the

rule, with measurements of 17-21 inches sought after. Tight-lacing of corsets was considered virtuous - a loose corset was a sign of a loose woman. To keep her innocence and virtue, a woman needed to protect herself from lustful men (and her own morality) by wearing heavily reinforced layers of clothing and tight corsets, thus making getting dressed and undressed a long and difficult task. The higher a lady was in society, the more confining her clothes.

However, in a society where health critics and the church voiced concern over damage to a woman's reproductive organs, there was severe opposition to tight-lacing of the long-waisted corsets. In time, wider skirts and low-cut dress necklines became the fashion, and corsets could be cut lower at the top (as they did not need to control the bust), as well as the bottom, becoming shorter and somewhat more comfortable.

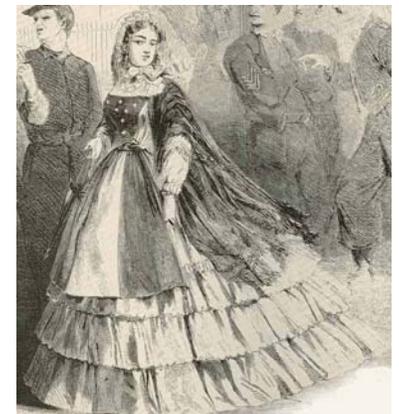
The Wire Manufacturer's Dream



The ever-increasing width of women's skirts was first achieved by several layers of petticoats. Prior to the Civil War, a woman of means wore five or six petticoats under her dress to achieve a nice bell shape. Each petticoat would contain approximately five to seven yards of fabric, as did the skirt. To support all this weight, the skirt was attached to the blouse by hooks and eyes, shifting the weight to the woman's shoulders. All this added to the perception of women being “weak” as they actually struggled to carry the oppressive weight of their clothing.

By the late 1850s, “well-fitting gowns” had crinolines (hoop skirts), steel-boned structures that replaced the multitude of petticoats and caused women's dresses to billow out even further. Considered a godsend at first, crinolines were lightweight, and women needed only one petticoat over the hoops to hide the rigid bones. Increased airflow around the legs kept the individual cool in the summer, while quilted petticoats worn over crinolines in the winter provided warmth. Hoop size varied - smaller ones averaged 100 inches around, while the largest could be 150 inches in circumference.

Donning the hoopskirt was rather complex. First, a chemise made of cotton or lawn (light cotton or linen) was put on over a pair of pantaloons. A whale-boned corset was laced to the point of breathlessness, over which went one or two petticoats. The crinoline was added and tied at the waist, creating a billowing skirt that could be six feet across, although four feet was nearer the average. The nation's largest wire manufacturer estimated that “...*the annual consumption of three thousand tons of steel is required to expand and give prominence to the ladies' dresses in this country.*”



"Tilters"

Frontispiece from "The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility"



Skirts were so long that writers of etiquette books, such as Emily Thornwell's *The Lady's Guide to Perfect Gentility* had to provide instructions of how to lift it in a graceful and decorous way when climbing stairs or walking on a muddy street. Navigating in such attire was not simple. Due to the crinoline, the wearer tried to adopt a gliding walk, with perfect balance to prevent the skirts from swinging or bouncing. Bouncing crinolines were said to be extremely seductive to men, as they got to peek under the skirts. Young women who wore hoopskirts were often known as "tilters" because of the skirt's

tendency to rise up in the back. Indeed, some male humorists accused women of exploiting this feature. Nonetheless, for all their coquettish possibilities, crinolines eventually became impractical. Because of the size of these "contraptions," men often complained that they could hardly enter a room beyond the door when three or four women wearing crinolines occupied the room. The hoopskirt's physical dangers were also very real, as many wearers were burnt to death by inadvertently approaching too near a fire.

The War-Time Economy



As war took over the country, however, women began to dress in conformance with the economy. When husbands, fathers, and brothers marched off to the fight, women took over the work on the home front. Many donned sunbonnets and simple dresses to do field or factory work. Often their fashionable finery was turned into bandages for use in the many hospitals created out of the necessity of war. The new look became a simple cotton or muslin dress, as Southern opulence and Northern high society fashions basically ceased to exist.

Fabric was conserved by piecing together smaller sections of matching prints, and using the pieced bits in inconspicuous places. Work clothes used reversible, solid fabrics or fabrics with woven prints with no "up" or "down," so that the panels (especially in the skirt) could be turned upside down and inside out for re-use when a garment became faded. Prints were usually used for work dresses as they hid the dirt better. Dress fronts were generally fastened with hooks and eyes, straight, or safety pins; buttons, if used, were covered with the same fabric as the dress. Metal and jet buttons were saved for use on outer clothing, while wooden ones were sewn on underwear.

Ladies' fashion of the mid-1800s never claimed to be comfortable or practical, and soon many women sought

change. Some campaigned against the corset on grounds that it imperiled their health. Others complained of the difficulty of keeping their long skirts clean - one popular writer stated that women should be paid by New York City for sweeping its streets every time they took a walk. Still others saw women's dress as the implements, as well as the symbols, of their subjection to men. As early as the 1840s, southern periodicals reflected the medical wisdom of the dress reform campaign, even if the 1860s woman did not. An 1842 article in *Magnolia* chastised: "Nothing can be more absurd - nothing more detrimental to health and beauty than the system of tightlacing." Even so, dress reform was a dangerous topic and any change in a woman's appearance was sure to provoke ridicule. Indeed, discussion of women's dress was effectively banned from the first national Women's Rights Convention held in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1850. So, despite the impracticality and discomfort, women continued to heed the dictates of fashion rather than practicality in matters of dress.



Gentlemen's Attire



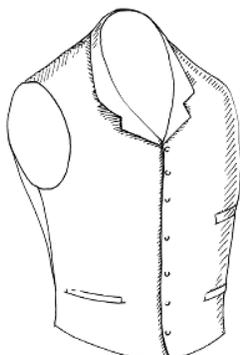
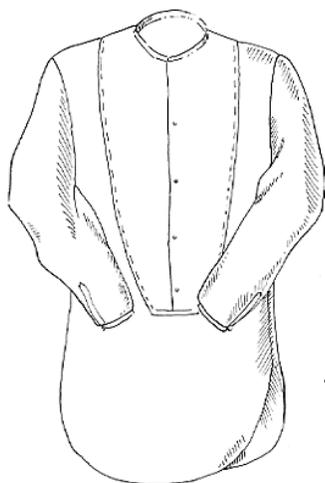
Martine's Handbook of Etiquette (1866) described men's attire thus:

"The dress of a gentleman should be such as not to excite any special observation, unless it be for neatness and propriety. The utmost care should be exercised to avoid even the appearance of desiring to attract attention....His dress should be studiously neat, leaving no other impression than that of a well dressed gentleman."

While women's fashions were often flamboyant, men's clothing took on a conservative look, as successful businessmen sought the loftier, more distinguished appearance of statesmen.

The business uniform of the day became the sober black suit, white linen shirt, black scarf tie (cravat), tall silk hat, and boots or gaiters. Formal evening wear changed hardly at all from around 1860 until the 1920s, and often consisted of a woolen black tail coat with a satin insert at the lapel. Vests were of black or white satin, accentuated by a silk cravat or white bow tie. Trousers were usually black and the white shirt was heavily starched. White gloves were an essential accessory, especially when dancing, as touching a lady with bare hands was not only a bit crude, but one's sweat could soil her gown.

The Essential Men's Wardrobe



Men's dress shirts pulled over the head and had three small bone buttons, with cuffs that closed with cufflinks. Made of white cotton and cut very long, they came down to the wearer's knees, but were not as full as shirts of the 1700s. Shirts were tucked, with pre-tied ties and one of any number of available collars. Collars were detachable, attached, starched, soft, or hardly there at all. One style was stiffly pointed, and often called the "Patricide," based on a story of a young man returning from university wearing this new (in the 1850s) style of starched collar. When his father embraced him, the points on the collar allegedly cut his father's throat. Although fictitious, the story was enough to name the collar. Detachable collars and cuffs were convenient for travelers who could now freshen these items without having to change shirts. Stiff collars could be washed and starched apart from the shirt, and thrown away when they became worn, while the shirt could remain in service for years to come. Initially made of linen, the collars were later created of cheap paper and celluloid.

Daily wear for businessmen might be a wool frock coat, loosely cut trousers, and a silk brocaded vest. Winter saw men dressed in wool hammertail frock coats which were double-breasted, with a wide notched shawl collar. Vests were usually made of the same material as the jacket and trousers, however, some sported garish colors, often of patterned Chinese silk. Considered an essential part of a gentleman's wardrobe in the

19th century, only those doing hard manual labor ever dispensed with the vest – and even these fellows would sport one on occasion. Coats and trousers of the same color and fabric were called "ditto" suits, and the outfit was completed with the addition of the new "bowler," a hat often worn with the crown pushed in to form a bowl.

Boots were knee-high and worn under the trouser leg, although another innovation during this period was the lace-up shoe, first appearing in the 1850s. By the second half of the 19th century, black patent leather became fashionable to wear with men's clothing.



Formal vs. Informal



Sack Suit



Morning Suit

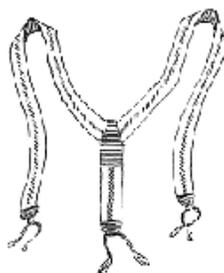
The sack suit, or business suit, was leisure wear for men who might wear a frock coat, but often considered the “best clothes” of the vast majority of American men. A banker would wear a sack suit to a picnic, while a cowboy or farmer would wear it to church. It first came into fashion in the 1850s as a very large, baggy garment, becoming more fitted in the 1860s and beyond, eventually evolving into the modern three-piece suit. Common colors were black or gray, and the pieces usually, but not always, matched. Colors were not restricted to these two choices, however, and plaid was particularly popular. Typically, the coat had four buttons, with the top one generally buttoned and the rest left undone. Buttons on sack suits were usually not covered, and made of wood, bone, or gutta-percha (galvanized rubber), in contrast to the buttons covered in silk or other fabric used on frock or morning coats. The sack suit’s popularity was assured by the fact it could be purchased, ready-made, at prices working men could afford.

Frock coats were single- or double-breasted, usually black, hemmed above

the knee, and distinguished by a squared shape at the bottom front. Morning coats were single-breasted, with a rounded, swallow-tail shape. Both were referred to as “morning” dress, distinguishing them from evening wear, and worn with contrasting pants and top or broad-brimmed, low-crowned hats.

In the 1880s, a compromise was made between the rigid formality of the frock suit and the casual informality of the sack suit, resulting in the “morning suit.” Retaining the gray, striped trousers, black vest and black coat of the frock suit, the cut was softened a bit by rounding the bottom hem of the coat and shrinking the lapels. And, unlike the frock suit for which a top hat was essential, the morning suit allowed a certain amount of latitude in headgear - top hats for business and formal calls, a tall crowned bowler for less dressy occasions. Although the morning suit was considered acceptable attire for business, the frock coat still reigned supreme with the management in the office. The sack or morning suit was considered more appropriate for junior staff and clerks.

Men’s Accessories



Men had considerable choice of necktie styles, although many working class types did without them entirely. By far the most common was the small, black, tidy bow tie, made from black silk ribbon about an inch wide and a yard long. Various forms of cravat, from the Windsor to the Ascot, also found their way under men’s chins. Usually of patterned silk, Windsors became the common neckwear with the morning suit, rather than the more formal bow tie, allowing this garment to be worn at weddings, funerals, and other daytime formal occasions. Colorful cravats were often seen with frock coats in the 1860s, but by the 1870s were again replaced mostly by small black bow ties.

Most men’s work clothes and underwear were homemade. Underclothing included woolen undershirts and drawers, with knitted cuffs. Drawers were held up by thin, lightweight suspenders that buttoned on the garment. The “union suit” (so-called not for the Union as opposed to the

Confederacy, but for its union of top and bottom into a one-piece garment), was also worn. Socks were of homespun wool, and when the foot portion wore out, the tops were carefully unwoven, the thread twisted on a spinning wheel, then knit into a new pair. Cotton socks were also available, but wore out more quickly, and were held in disdain by most men of the era.

Work shirts were wool flannel, linen, or cotton pullovers, with a double-breasted front closure for warmth. Red, blue, or checked material was popular. Wool, corduroy, or denim trousers were worn by farmers, laborers, ranchers, and factory workers, and held up by suspenders, though this accessory was unpopular with men who had to frequently bend and stoop. Trousers did not commonly have belt loops until the 20th century. Most men’s clothes of this era, were worn looser than in previous decades, with many individuals seeming to take pride in their “rumpled” look.

Dawn of the Ready-Made Clothing Industry

By the end of the 1850s, most women's clothing, men's work clothes, children's garments, and underwear were still homemade. But ready-made men's business and formal attire was a booming industry - even before the arrival of the first sewing machines in the mid-1800s. While wealthy women traveled to Europe, New York or Boston to find the latest styles, and have copies of the latest English or French gowns made, over 4,000 men's clothing manufacturers did business in the United States by 1850. Ready-made clothing establishments competed with

the more numerous firms of traditional custom tailors, who had devised a proportional sizing system to cut and sew for the "average" man during slack seasons when individual orders were few.

But not until the Civil War were commercial possibilities for ready-made clothing realized, as the Union Army, desperate for uniforms, conceived a set of standard sizes for soldiers and began sending orders to clothing manufacturers. As the practice of making standardized outfits caught on, ready-made clothing became a major industry.

Army Uniforms

Gray vs. Blue - Early in the war this rule didn't apply. Many Federal units went to war wearing the bluish-grey uniform of the pre-war militia cadet, and many Confederate units wore dark blue

uniforms. One Louisiana unit, fighting at Shiloh, took off their blue coats and turned them inside out, to prevent taking friendly fire from their own forces.

Union



The Northern clothing industry benefited enormously from the boost given to new technology by the Civil War. The number of sewing machines almost doubled between 1860 and 1865, and clothing manufacture became a mammoth industry. Woolen mills, galvanized into activity by the disappearance of Southern cotton, enjoyed a boom under the stimulus of contracts for uniforms. Wool production more than doubled, and a number of manufacturers amassed profits so stupendous that they were able to reward their stockholders with annual dividends of between 10 and 40 per cent.

Uniforms of the Northern army were fairly consistent, with the exception of widely varying headgear. And indeed, hats and caps were usually the first item of clothing to disappear in the heat of battle. Traditionally, blue was the distinctive color for the infantry, yellow for the cavalry, and red for the artillery. Insignia worn by the infantryman was the bugle, crossed swords for cavalry, and crossed cannon barrels for artillery. These could be found on uniform buttons or fastened to headgear. Uniforms scarcely changed over the course of the war, with the army-issued outfit principally consisting of the Hardee hat, fatigue/forage cap (kepi), a blue woolen tunic with one row of nine copper uniform buttons, a short flannel coat, a blue jacket with a collar and pockets, a grey cotton or civilian-style "hickory" checkered shirt, sky-blue trousers for soldiers, dark blue for officers, a sky-blue overcoat with a detachable cape,

the indispensable grey flannel underclothing and accessories - grey wool socks, suspenders, etc. - and leather army shoes called brogans, among the first mass-produced footwear which distinguished between the right and left foot. It was also during the Civil War that soles of boots were first sewn to leggings. But bad quality shoes during the war's first years seriously plagued the Union infantrymen.

The original 1858 forage caps had a narrow leather visor and high crown with a round, usually flat top flopping forward at a sharp angle. The kepi was a French style forage cap with a lower crown and a top tilting at a much smaller angle. Where the top of a forage cap was flat, a kepi usually had a raised roll around the outside of the round top. Except for some rare and important exceptions, the forage cap became the headgear of choice.

Initially, extraneous accessories often weighed down the campaigning soldier, and quickly joined other useless accoutrements in roadside ditches. But after 1862, the different parts making up the army uniform were of excellent quality. The care put into the uniform's manufacture, the industrial technology used, the quality of the materials, and the know-how of the textile workers, among others, contributed to the Union army having one of the best equipped infantries of the late 19th century. Practical uniforms and often-lightened equipment contributed in the same way as armament to the modern aspect of the conflict.



Confederate



Due to its diverse richness (or lack of industrial means, depending on one's view), Confederate troops displayed a panorama of uniforms. Early in the war, each unit had its own distinctive design, and Southern troops arrived on the battlefield wearing uniforms of varying colors and cuts. Unfortunately, most uniforms issued by the army were very ill-fitting, and many soldiers had to hastily learn to sew in order to make them wearable. The basic parts of the uniform were identical to those produced and used by the North, and any rare differences can be attributed, in part, to industrial factors and hazards of the Northern blockade.

One reason Southern industry was less successful at clothing the Confederate troops, was the inadequacy of the Quartermaster Department, soon overwhelmed by the difficulties in providing supplies. A glaring example involved the establishment of a large factory in Richmond in 1861, responsible for cutting the cloth for uniforms but not for producing the finished product. The assembly was entrusted to local women, doing the work in their homes. Soon there were 2,000 women stitching uniforms in Richmond, another 3,000 in Atlanta, and thousands more throughout the South. This decentralized cottage industry was highly dependent on transport, and the South's fragile railroad system was never equal to the task. As a result, military uniforms remained in short supply.

Compounding the problems of poor planning and implementation was the fact that individual states often reserved most of the cotton and wool produced within their borders for men of their own militias. This practice left little cloth for the overall Confederate troops. At the end of 1864, North Carolina was consuming the entire production of her 40 textile mills - fully half of the mills still remaining in the South.

Confederate soldiers usually wore hand-sewn shirts, and drawers made of cotton sheeting with drawstring closures on the ankle cuffs. Trousers were of gray wool cloth, as were jackets which had brass buttons and blue edging on the shoulder straps. Essential items of any uniform

included army-issued cotton or homespun wool socks and suspenders made of cotton, linen, canvas, or leather if available.

Hats provided warmth in winter, shade in summer, some protection from rain, and served as handy bags to carry foraged supplies. Favored headgear of Southern troops was the slouch hat, often with a beehive-style crown. The white linen havelock was initially introduced to be worn on the head to protect from sunstroke, and sewn in quantity by Southern women to send to the troops. It soon became a nuisance, and a dislike for the accessory became readily apparent: *"...as it was made sufficiently large to cover the neck and shoulders, the effect, when properly adjusted, was to deprive the wearer of any air he might otherwise enjoy."* Havelocks quickly became dishcloths and coffee strainers.

Leather brogans were issued, but keeping the Confederate soldier shod in good footwear proved a problem for the army throughout the war. Raw leather was in short supply, as the region had been accustomed to buying its shoes and saddles from the North. Expectations to get needed leather from the cattle and horse farms, and tanneries of Tennessee were thwarted when the source was cut off by the Northern invasion in 1862, leaving the South with a chronic shortage of the material. In coping with wartime shortages, independent entrepreneurs often showed more flexibility than did government bureaucracy or military agencies, experimenting with the skins of squirrels and alligators, and selling as many wooden clogs as they could make.

The necessity of using war booty, especially in the South, often caused the Confederate troops to claim they were fighting so as to get a pair of boots off the bodies of dead Union soldiers.



Slouch Hat



Havelock

A Myriad of Colors



Steel Gray



Richmond Gray



Gray Jean Wool



Brown Jean Wool



Butternut

Initially, uniforms were made of un-dyed wool. Although grey was officially chosen by the Confederacy as the color to distinguish its army from that of the North, over the course of the war, several different colors were used for uniform jackets.

Confederate States (CS) gray, a steel blue color, was the "ideal" gray ordered used by the government. However, it soon became the color used only by officers and those in Richmond, and for one reason or another, very few fighting men were ever issued coats of this hue. Other gray colors included: **Tuscaloosa gray**, lighter than CS Gray with a slight tan pigment; **Richmond gray**, a very dark gray looking almost black in some lights; **Cadet gray**, a gray containing a heavy sea blue pigment and a cross-section of white thread (this gray was mainly used for the boys in southern military schools), and **gray jean wool**, the most correct color of gray, which was a mixture of gray and white wool, and sometimes referred to as "salt and pepper gray." **Brown jean wool** was of the same concept as the gray jean, but the color was a mixture of brown with a touch of gray, resulting in a light brown/dark tan shade mixed with gray and white stitches.

The butternut color, so commonly associated with the Confederacy, was

adopted during 1863 - not as a substitute or actual conscious choice, but rather as the result of circumstances and adapting to the trials of the moment. Originally a brown/tan/khaki color appearing as early as 1862, it was in extensive use by 1863, and worn almost exclusively by the Confederate army by late 1864. One theory of the color's origin was use of a different gray dye which changed colors after getting wet. Although not noticeable when slightly damp, it could change hue in one heavy downpour. Another explanation was the supposed use of leaves, bark, and unripe fruit of the North American butternut tree to make a chocolate-brown dye, thus creating the distinctive butternut color. At times, the dye color would become darker as it endured more rain and weather. Neither a very dark nor light brown, butternut had no hint of gray in its makeup.

Most of these colors were also used for trousers, the only additional hue being sky blue, the same color used by the Federal infantry. Sadly, however, and particularly during the last months of the war, the Southern soldier ended up with little better than rags to wear.

